

Something More by mileven1302

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Summary: Set from the Snow Ball in 1984 and the days after. Ongoing story... Focused on Mike and Eleven and the early stages of their relationship. The first two chapters are set at the Snow Ball and there is some cross over from canon (Copyright the Duffer Brothers for the first chapter dialogue). Reviews welcome but I'm just doing this for fun :)

1. Chapter 1

Chapter One

Mike sat alone at the Snow Ball, unable to focus on anything but the thought of El. His friends were now all on the dance floor; Max with Lucas, Will with a girl called Sarah and Dustin, unfortunately, with, his sister. But even the thought of one of his best friends dancing with Nancy couldn't distract him tonight.

He missed her, terribly. Her absence from his life over the last year had been nothing up to the last month. She was a constant ache in his heart. She filled his thoughts constantly and he didn't... couldn't feel whole without her.

He kept replaying the night she'd come back... over and over in his head. The noises of the demo-dogs outside... the crash as one had come through the window... the chain on the lock... and then she'd walked in and simply stood there. More beautiful than he could possibly have imagined. He'd felt that his heart had surely stopped as the tears rushed to his eyes. He couldn't breathe. She was there.

'Eleven...'

'Mike...'

He strode towards her, wrapping his arms around her, his breath coming in short, jagged bursts. She was *here*. His El. His girl. She was finally there, with him.

'I never gave up on you,' he grinned through his tears. 'I called you every night. *Every night* for;'

'Three hundred and fifty three days,' El sobbed.

The words hit him like punches to the stomach. His heart swooped. 'Why didn't you tell me you were there? That you were okay?'

His fight with Hopper had played in his head over and over... It made moments like now, when he was alone, without her, even harder to take. Of course he knew why he hadn't been able to see her. She was

in danger. She was a fugitive. The thought hardened his jaw and made his eyes prickle with tears... but that didn't make it easier. All those nights he could have spent with her... all those days they could have done things together... gone to the movies... or walking in the woods... all those times he could have kissed her...but she could never really have a normal life, she could never really go to the Snow Ball, could she?

His heart hurt again and he sniffled, not realising that he was nearly crying again. He looked back at the dance floor... his friends looked to be having a great time. He smiled lightly. They all deserved that...but no-one deserved it more than El... She should be here... he thought again. Would she have remembered that he wanted to go with her the year before... just before he had kissed her for the first time?

But his thoughts drifted not to their first kiss, but the last time he had seen her...

'Just be careful, all right? I can't lose you again...'

'You won't lose me,' she had said softly, inches from his face.

A tear trickled down his cheek. 'Do you promise?'

'Promise.'

Mike's heart ached once more, his stomach flipping with excitement as she had leaned in to kiss him.

Hopper had interrupted them. Never in his life had Mike wanted to kiss her so badly. He had wanted to kiss her when she'd first walked through the door at Will's... as soon as she'd walked in...but her presence had had him mesmerised. He desperately wanted to feel her lips on his... but at the same time, he just wanted to look at her, take in every inch of her presence; her hair, her eyes, her body, her feet, her hands; every inch of her.

And she'd driven away... she'd closed the gate. Hop had said she'd slept for three days after defeating the Mind Flayer. Then she'd had to go back to the Lab... He'd called Hopper and Joyce every day since

then... desperate to see her. But Hop had always said it was too risky and that he was waiting for a meeting with someone...but didn't she want to see him as well?

And right then, alone at the Snow Ball, he wondered if maybe she didn't want to see him. Maybe everything was too painful? Maybe there were things that she'd experienced that had changed everything? Would she really be interested in a stupid Snow Ball after what she'd been through?

Mike shook his head, 'So stupid,' he muttered to himself. Why did it matter so much anyway?

The music changed, he noticed, and he looked up at his friends briefly. They were still dancing. He lowered his head glumly and sunk back into his daydream, thinking about her face. Her big brown eyes, the contour of her cheeks, her smiling lips.

The door to the gym opened and Mike looked over absent mindedly.

His heart stopped. She was there.

El's hair was chocolate brown and curly, resting at the base of her neck. Her eyes were soft and pink. She wore a blue dress with a pink sash. He had never seen anything so beautiful.

Mike's breath caught on his chest and he got to his feet.

El looked around the gym for him... before finally finding him. Their eyes locked and Mike felt that he couldn't breathe.

Despite the fact that he had wanted to go onto that dance floor with El all night, now suddenly, he found his legs felt like jelly. She walked over to him. He gulped hard but smiled warmly. 'You look beautiful,' he said breathlessly.

El smiled shyly.

'Do you wanna dance?' he asked quickly.

El looked briefly at the dance floor at the figures swaying to the music. 'I don't know how,' she replied.

Mike shrugged but smiled, 'I don't either. Do you wanna figure it out?'

El nodded, smiling shyly again. Mike took her hand and led her onto the dance floor. His heart was still beating fast but his excitement and anticipation of holding her allowed him to power through his jitters. He took her arms and placed them on his chest, 'I think...like this...' His body tingled when she curled her fingers around his neck. 'Yeah, like that.' He smiled widely and they began to move to the music.

He couldn't take his eyes off her. Her hazel eyes were wide, beautiful, innocent, and they were looking right *into* him. It made his heart dance and his stomach fluttered with nerves. He thought again of the night she had returned... how he'd held her... he thought of every day he'd contacted her... she had been there... she had heard him... he thought of the way she had leaned in towards him that night...she had been going to kiss him...

He looked back at her now even though he'd never really left. Something burned deep within his soul. He felt electricity surging through his body. He couldn't wait any longer. He had to kiss her. He *needed* to.

Mike leaned in and gently pressed his lips on hers.

El's breath caught on her chest. Mike smiled shyly and she smiled back, resting her forehead against his. Mike felt a sweet release now they had kissed again. It felt like the beginning of something special... something *more*... She was his girl and he was her guy and nothing could ever come between them again.

2. Chapter 2

Chapter Two

'Don't let us interrupt,' said a familiar voice.

Mike and Eleven drew apart to see Dustin, Lucas, Max and Will at their side. Unbeknownst to Mike and El, the music had changed. Lucas and Dustin gave Mike a familiar look, their eyes drifting to his fingers, now intertwined with El's.

Mike flushed pink and all he could think to say was, 'Yeah.'

As they began to walk away from the dance floor to a table at the side of the room, Dustin tapped him lightly on the shoulder, 'S'okay, Mike, there's no need to be embarrassed, I just danced with your sister.' Dustin looked over his shoulder to wave briefly at Nancy.

Nancy smiled and waved back.

Mike rolled his eyes, reluctantly letting go of El's hand so he could pull out a chair for her at the table. She sat down, also flushed red.

'Great to see you, El,' Lucas said happily. 'You look great.'

'Yeah, you do,' chirped up Will. 'We weren't sure if you were coming.'

'One night,' she said, shrugging her shoulders. 'Halfway happy.'

Mike sat down next to her and smiled sadly. He had suspected tonight would be a one off, somehow. His sadness was replaced with happiness as he locked eyes with El once again. She was still thinking about the kiss. His stomach flip flopped. How could one person have such an effect on him? He tore his eyes away from her.

Dustin grinned, locating some chocolates in the centre of the table. 'So, then, what, you're gonna start school with us next year? Will you be in ninth grade with us?'

'Jesus, Dustin, let her breathe,' Mike said.

Dustin shrugged, his mouth full of chocolate. 'I was only asking.'

El smiled. 'It's okay, Mike. Next year, I think. Fall?'

Next to Lucas, Max shifted in her seat. Lucas and Dustin exchanged looks. Dustin cleared his throat matter of factly, 'El, this is Max. She's our friend.'

The boys all smiled, nodding, but their smiles soon faded when El didn't appear to share their enthusiasm.

'We've met before,' Max said quietly. 'You know we have.'

Silence.

'Well this is awkward,' said Dustin.

Lucas straightened in his chair and took a deep breath. 'Yeah, Max is my *girlfriend*.'

El frowned, looking confused. Will grinned. Dustin rolled his eyes.

Max whirled on Lucas, 'You haven't asked me yet, stalker.'

Lucas smiled awkwardly. 'I'm asking you now?'

Another song started and Max got to her feet, dragging Lucas along with her. 'I'll think about it,' she said as they were leaving.

Mike frowned at Max and Lucas' departure. 'What was all that about?'

Dustin laughed, 'Again, your total obliviousness blows my mind. For a smart guy, you can be really dense sometimes, Mike.'

'What?'

Dustin rolled his eyes. 'Until about two weeks ago, you were a total dick to Max.'

'That's not true!'

'It is, Mike,' Will admitted, quietly.

Eleven wrinkled her nose, puzzled, and looked at Mike. 'You were?'

Mike shrugged. 'It was hard... I missed El...' He looked at El gently, 'I missed you.'

Dustin took another piece of chocolate and inspected the wrapper. 'But, let's face it, you didn't tell Max that... you didn't really explain why you were such a dick to her. She probably just thinks you're a dick, period.'

'I...I...' Mike stuttered to his friends. 'You're probably right... but it was hard, you know?'

El paused before asking. 'You don't like her?'

Mike frowned. 'What?'

'You don't like Max?'

Mike looked over at Max, who was now locked in a fierce embrace with Lucas. 'What? No way! I like you, El! Only you! More than like... I...Don't you realise that... I-' His voice trailed off and he met El's eyes once more. His heart faltered again as she smiled shyly.

Dustin and Will exchanged looks. Will giggled as he said, 'Maybe we should give you two some privacy?' They got up and headed for the camera, where Jonathan was chatting with Nancy.

Mike and El watched them leave before Mike turned his chair to face El. She swung her legs round to face him, looking carefully, sensitively, into his eyes. Mike took a deep breath. 'El, why would you ever think that I liked Max?'

El sighed. 'I saw you with her... in here. She was on her...her...

'Skateboard?' Mike said gently.

'Skateboard,' El confirmed. She pressed her lips together. 'She was smiling. And you were smiling. I don't know... I thought maybe you liked her.'

Mike laughed softly, 'I thought you were there that day...' He sighed

and took El's hands in his. 'You were jealous...,' he realised, 'you moved her board.'

El looked shamefully away from Mike before asking, 'What is jealous?'

Mike sighed, 'You were angry because you thought I liked her... more than you?' Mike was almost hurt. The idea that anyone, *anyone* other than El could even register on his orbit was just crazy to him. The way he felt about El was indescribable. She was his everything. How could she not know that? He laughed softly. 'I do like her, El... you know, she's pretty cool, I guess but...'

'But what?'

'She's not you,' Mike whispered. He smiled softly. 'With you and me... I don't know. It's different.'

'How?'

Mike's heart ached, 'With us, it's... I don't know... it's something *more*.'

El nodded... understanding and smiling shyly.

Mike looked over at Will and Dustin... now making funny faces in front of the camera with Nancy. He looked for Max and Lucas who had now left the dance floor and were sucking face on the other side of the room. He wanted to make sure they were far away... so he wouldn't be heard...

Mike looked at his El, swallowing hard. 'I missed you so much when you were away.'

'I missed you too,' she said softly.

'Sometimes I felt like it was all just a dream, you know?'

'A good dream?'

Mike grinned, 'Yeah, a really good dream.' He started to stroke her fingers within his own and El smiled warmly. 'I couldn't stop thinking about you. I mean, I saw you, when you came back to my house the

night you killed the Demogorgon...and it's like... I don't know... I couldn't believe you were alive... but then I never saw you again.'

El smiled, and Mike wiped away a tear that had trickled down her cheek at his words. She looked into his eyes. 'It wasn't safe. I wanted to see you. I visited you every night.'

'How?' Mike asked. His stomach flipped. All of those times when he had somehow *felt* her, she had been there?

El cleared her throat. 'In my mind. I used the TV... and a blindfold. Sometimes I think you heard me, but...'

'I thought I was going crazy,' Mike replied, squeezing her hand. He realised that his eyes had filled with tears too. 'This whole thing is crazy. Guys like me don't really get girlfriends, you know?'

El frowned. 'What's a girlfriend? Lucas said Max was his girlfriend, didn't he?'

Mike flushed red again. El's innocence was infuriating and adorable. He cleared his throat, suddenly feeling like he hadn't drunk anything in weeks. 'Yeah... he um..., yeah he did.'

'Mike?'

'Yeah?'

'Am I your girlfriend?'

Mike lifted his focus from their locked hands to her eyes. 'Do you want to be?' he asked nervously.

El nodded and smiled at him again.

Mike's face broke into a broad grin and his stomach started to flutter. Releasing one hand from hers, he cupped her cheek and crushed his lips onto hers.

Mike ran his hands through her hair at the back of her neck and then stroked her face gently. He drank in every inch of her, smelling her sweet perfume, wanting so desperately to hold her in his arms again.

Their kiss grew more passionate. He felt the electricity, stronger now than ever before. He drew away from her reluctantly, breathless. Her eyes were still closed at first, but opened slowly. 'Mike...'

'Yeah?' he grinned.

'Merry Christmas.'

'Merry Christmas, El,' he whispered, leaning his forehead against hers once more. His body ached with happiness and longing. If this was what falling in love was, he wanted to do it over and over again, and only ever with her. His beautiful Eleven.

3. Chapter 3

Chapter Three

'Next week, kid. Saturday the twenty-second...and maybe Christmas Eve if you're lucky.'

The words had echoed in Mike's head all week. School was out for Christmas that day, Friday, and tomorrow, the Chief had promised that he could go round to the cabin and see her. Mike watched the clock's minutes ticking by in the final hour of the semester.

The Snow Ball had been such an amazing night and for Mike, was a painful reminder of how wonderful it was to have El back in his life. Just her presence made everything seem more fun somehow... he felt complete, like he was enjoying life again for the very first time. But every time he said goodbye, it got harder.

'Mike, you coming?'

Mike's thoughts about the Snow Ball last week had left him oblivious to the bell which had just rung out the end of term. 'What? Oh yeah...' Mike collected his bag and the boys and Max headed for the corridor.

'School is out!' Lucas punched the air. 'I can't wait for this weekend, I swear!'

'Stalker is just worried I'm gonna kick his ass at the arcade on Sunday,' Max grinned.

'You probably will,' Dustin jibed. 'D&D, your house, tomorrow though, right?' Dustin tapped Mike on the shoulder. 'We have some serious campaigns to plan this holiday.'

They reached the door and went outside, locating their bikes

Mike's stomach dropped. 'Actually... I...'

Dustin turned on him, 'Actually, what?'

'Nothing,' Mike replied quickly but Will raised an eyebrow suspiciously. Mike met his eyes but gave him a knowing look.

'Max, you in?' Lucas asked lightly.

'If it's okay with Mike,' Max replied carefully.

Mike nodded, 'Of course.'

Max smiled. 'Nice to see you're not such a shithead now your girlfriend's back.'

'Holy shit!' Lucas exclaimed. 'Have you asked Eleven to be your girlfriend?'

Mike blushed red but smiled. 'Yeah... well she kind of asked herself,' he laughed. 'It's not a big deal.'

'Not a big deal,' Dustin said coyly.

Max laughed. 'I like her already. Make sure she knows that I don't fancy you, Wheeler.' Max got on the back of Lucas' bike and wrapped her arms around him. 'So not my type.'

Lucas grinned and the pair cycled off.

Dustin sighed, 'I think I'm gonna vomit a little bit. Do they have to be so full on?'

'Sorry, Dustin,' Will said, tapping his friend on the shoulder.

'Hey shitheads!'

Will, Dustin and Mike turned around to see Steve had pulled up in front of them. 'Hey Steve!' Dustin called.

'You need a ride? I'm heading home?'

Dustin looked briefly at his bike but then grinned. 'Yeah, thanks, that'd be awesome!'

'Wheeler? Byers?'

Will smiled but said, 'No, we're good, thanks. My Mom's coming for me in a minute anyway.'

'Fair enough,' Steve replied. Dustin got in the front seat and the pair drove away.

Mike took his bike out of the rack.

Will sighed, 'How are you going to juggle a D&D campaign with going to see El tomorrow?'

'How'd you know?'

'Hopper said. He's been coming over a lot recently.'

Mike's stomach jolted uncomfortably. 'With El?'

Will nodded. 'I didn't want to say anything in case I'd got it wrong but... I think... Mom and Hopper might be dating...'

Mike's eyes widened. 'Shit, really?'

Will fiddled with the straps on his bag. 'I mean, I guess it's been hard on her since Bob died, but Hopper's been really great. He's always been great. He always came to the lab with me...' Will smiled faintly. 'I'm sorry I didn't tell you.'

Mike felt a flash of jealousy that Will had been able to see El when he hadn't, but knew he was being stupid. Mike wheeled his bike to the front of the school and Will followed. 'How is she?'

Will smiled, 'She's great. She can't wait to see you... tomorrow.'

Mike rolled his eyes. 'I don't know what to do. I want to play D&D but at the same time, Hopper never lets me see her. It's like she's on lock-down until Owens gives them the all clear which I don't think is gonna be till next year... I'd be surprised if Lucas and Max even come tomorrow anyway. Everything's different now.'

'It doesn't have to be,' Will replied.

'What do you mean?'

'What if I could convince the Chief to let El come to yours on Saturday?'

'You think you could do that?' Mike asked excitedly. His mind started racing. Scenarios where he and El could cuddle up in the den together...he could hold her hand, his stomach flipped, maybe he could kiss her again? Then he remembered that the boys would be there...

'I could try,' Will offered with a smile.

Mike grinned widely. 'Shit, Will, that would be awesome!'

'Will, sweetie!'

Joyce pulled up beside the boys just as a few snowflakes were starting to fall. Will got into the front seat quickly. 'Hey Mike, how's it going?' Joyce asked.

'Good thanks, Mrs. Byers,' Mike replied.

Joyce nodded. 'You boys had a good day?'

'Long but good.'

'Wish your Mum a 'Merry Christmas' from me, won't you?' Joyce asked Mike.

Mike nodded.

'Hey Mom, is Hopper coming over tonight?' Will blurted suddenly.

Mike's heart jumped.

Joyce blushed red and she scratched the back of her head. 'Maybe, sweetie. Why?'

'Can Mike come for supper?' Will asked immediately.

4. Chapter 4

Chapter Four

Following the winding roads to the Byers' house, Mike suddenly found his palms were sweating. Why did he always get so worked up when he was about to see Eleven? The thought of tomorrow had been causing his stomach to feel funny all week but now... this impromptu visit had sent his hormones into overdrive.

'I think your sister might be coming for tea tonight as well,' Joyce said lightly.

Mike was in a daze. 'What, why?'

Will laughed. 'Er.. her and Jonathan?'

'Oh... yeah... right I forgot,' Mike said quickly, pushing the image to the back of his mind, focusing more on the fact that he was sweating profusely at the thought of seeing El again.

Joyce looked at Mike in the front mirror. 'I think he's quite taken with her,' she smiled. 'She's such a lovely girl. Really good for him, I think.'

'Yeah.. I guess,' Mike replied awkwardly.

They pulled up outside the Byers house. Mike noted that the window was still broken from when El had sent the dead Demo-dog through it the previous month. It seemed like a lifetime ago. Jonathan and Hopper had boarded it over with wood for the time being.

The Chief's jeep wasn't there yet, but Jonathan's car was pulled up outside. Nancy was there.

Will, Mike and Joyce entered the house, and Mike and Will sat down on the sofa. 'Jonathan! Nancy! We're home!'

A beat.

'Just a sec, Mom!' Jonathan called out, a nervous tone to his voice.

Mike and Will exchanged knowing looks. Mike was once again reminded that his sister was dating Will's brother. They'd probably had sex...He shuddered...but then flushed red as he thought about his last passionate kiss with Eleven. They were far too young for that now... but one day...He started sweating again. Everything was different now... she was his *girlfriend*.

'Are you okay?' Will asked Mike.

Mike nodded, 'Yeah, yeah, I'm fine.'

Joyce went to the phone to ring Mike's Mom and Will got him and Mike orange juice from the fridge and let Mike into his room. Mike, unable to sit down just yet, started admiring the drawings on the wall.

'These are so great, Will,' he smiled.

'Thanks,' Will replied.

Mike came across one particular drawing and looked back at Will with soft eyes. The drawing was of the six of them; him, Eleven, Will, Dustin, Lucas and Max, all as they were at the Snow Ball. 'You drew this from memory?'

'Yeah, I mean... it was a great night. I wanted to remember it. The first time I've felt normal since... everything.'

'And you danced with...'

'Sarah,' Will smiled shyly. 'She was really nice. I don't know. I think it was just for that night,' he giggled. 'It's not like it is with you and Eleven.'

Mike smiled, his stomach squirming again. But somehow, it felt easier to talk to Will about this stuff. It always had. 'I don't know, it's just different. The others, I don't think they get it, not really anyway. Even Lucas and Max, it feels like...'

'All they do is suck face?' Will offered.

Mike laughed. 'Yeah, I guess.' He sat down on the bed next to Will.

'With El, when I'm with her, it feels like it's just us, you know? Like the whole world just stops and it's just us.'

'Jonathan said it's like that with Nancy,' Will said softly.

Mike thought he would feel grossed out by that, but instead, he felt happy. He had a sip of juice. 'When El was here, did she say anything about me?'

Will grinned. 'You're all she talks about.'

The boys' conversation was interrupted by the sound of a car on the drive. The boys flew to the window. Mike's stomach dropped. Hopper's jeep. They peeped over the frame to see the unmistakable form of Jim Hopper get out of the car. Joyce went out to meet him and the two shared a brief kiss.

Mike and Will looked at each other. 'Make that a definite 'dating',' Mike said but then squinted further through the dark. 'I don't see her... do you see her?'

Will looked intently outside. 'No, I don't see her.'

Mike felt deflated but then...'If she's not here... and Hopper is...?'

'Borrow my bike!' Will exclaimed. Leaving Mike in his room, he padded across the way to Jonathan's room, calling down the hallway to Hopper briefly. 'Hey Hopper!'

'Hey kid, how's it going?'

Will opened the door to Jonathan's room without knocking, putting a hand over his eyes as he did so. 'Jonathan, where's Hopper's place?'

'You can uncover your eyes, bud,' Jonathan said.

Will took his hand away to see Jonathan and Nancy on Jonathan's bed, laying next to each other, listening to music.

'Hey Will,' Nancy smiled. 'Did I hear Mike with you?'

'No!' Will said defensively.

Jonathan laughed. 'I gotcha, bud.'

Nancy frowned. 'I don't understand.'

Jonathan went to his dresser and retrieved a map. 'Will here is trying to allow Mike some time with Eleven but doesn't want Hopper to know that he knows that he's...'

'Leaving Eleven on her own...' Nancy filled in.

'For the first time since Mike knew she was alive,' Will smiled.

Jonathan drew a few scribbles on the map. 'You're a good friend, Will.'

'I know.'

Will took the map back down the hallway where Mike was already in his coat, hat and gloves, ready to go. 'My bike is round the side of the house. Stay low and you should be fine.'

Will handed Mike the map and a torch. 'I don't know how long he's gonna stay so be as quick as you can. He must have finished early today. He's not usually home from work till 5.15.'

Mike's heart soared. It was 3.45. He would have at least an hour with her... maybe?

'Thanks Will!' Mike said excitedly. 'I owe you!'

'I'll still ask the Chief about tomorrow!' Will grinned as Mike straddled his window frame, crawling like Indiana Jones round the front of the house. Seconds later, he retrieved Will's bike from the shed and was gone, into the night.

5. Chapter 5

Chapter Five

Mike's heart was racing as he cycled as quickly as he could, following Jonathan's map. There was a note about a trip wire which made Mike very nervous – he really needed to be careful. But nothing... nothing could stand in his way. A whole hour... on his own with Eleven?

When she had been staying with him last year, they had spent a lot of time alone together, he thought, but now they were *boyfriend* and *girlfriend*, it was undoubtedly different. And he knew that when and if *Hopper* found out that they were actually dating, his time with El would be even more precious. He couldn't help how he felt about her... Hopper had seen and known that when he'd found out that El was alive.

Mike laughed in spite of himself. He had hit Hopper, sworn at him, called him a piece of shit. He'd just been so angry... how could he have done it? How could he have not told him that she was alive? But then he smiled.. remembering everything that had happened since.

Finally, he reached the oak tree highlighted on Jonathan's map, dismounted his bike and cautiously moved through the dark woods with his torch.

The cabin was quite easy to find, and knowing how to get to where she was every day was something of a comfort to Mike. The whole place was surrounded by thick trees, and smoke billowed out from the chimney. Mike rested his bike under some nearby bushes and scoured the surroundings for the trip wire. At first, he had thought it was a spider's web, glistening in the moonlight, but on closer inspection, he noted the traps fastened to the tree trunks. He stepped carefully over the wire, approaching the porch hesitantly.

His heart began to beat faster and faster. What if she didn't want to see him? He discarded the thought. Surely she would want to see him. She was his *girlfriend*, wasn't she? He smiled lightly, 'Hey El,' he practised. 'I just thought I'd stop by and see you...' No, that was

stupid. 'Hey El, Hop went by Will's so I thought we could just...' No that was worse.

'Mike?'

Mike looked up and there she was, beaming at him in the doorway. She was wearing jeans and a brown checked shirt that matched her eyes. He froze, his stomach swooping uncontrollably. 'Er... hi El,' he said nervously.

He went up the stairs, standing only a few feet in front of her.

'Does my Dad know you're here?'

Mike smiled lightly. 'You've never called him that before.'

She returned his smile. 'I know.'

'Can I come in?'

El nodded and Mike entered the cabin. It was cosy and warm, with a sofa, television and fire in front of them, a small kitchen, table and chairs. There was also a full sized bed, which Mike assumed was Hopper's. He could see an open door to another room, with a checked bedspread and a bear.

Mike lingered in the living room area, not really knowing what to do, except take his coat off because it was warm in there. Should he have kissed her already? Should he have hugged her? He took a deep breath and gave her a light kiss on the cheek. She dipped her head shyly.

El sat down on the sofa and put a blanket over herself, turning down the volume on the television. 'What are you doing here?' she smiled.

Mike sat down, 'I er..' Why did he feel so nervous? Why couldn't he form words? Say something, Wheeler, *anything*. 'I wanted to see you... alone.' Anything but something that makes you sound like a creepy stalker, Mike scolded himself.

El looked confused.

Mike cleared his throat. 'You see, Hopper said I could see you tomorrow,' El smiled and Mike continued, 'which is great... but then I went to Will's because I thought you might be there... and then Hopper came, without you... and then I thought you'd be alone and-'

Eleven kissed him fiercely, pulling him towards her on the sofa. Mike forgot everything, and was soon lying beside her, wrapping his arms around her, feeling her hair in his hands and her soft cheeks on his fingers.

'Hi,' she said, grinning.

Mike smiled, blushing, 'Hi.' He reached down and slipped his hand into hers. 'Hopper doesn't know I'm here. I don't know how long we have.'

El smiled. 'I can usually hear his car.'

Mike kissed her again, slowly this time, resting his head against hers as he loved to do. 'What did you do today?'

'Watched TV... loads of movies. Read some books. Dad says my reading is getting better.'

Mike smiled widely. 'That's great. My reading's never been great. I'm pretty good at science... Lucas was always better at English than me and Dustin.'

'And Will likes Art,' Eleven smiled.

Mike nodded. 'Will said he was gonna try and talk to your Dad about you coming round to mine tomorrow.'

'Like last year?'

Mike grinned. 'Yeah, like last year.' They both sat up from their intimate position and El pulled the blanket over them both. Mike took her hand again. He really loved to hold her hand, just to be touching her felt so amazing. As if she'd heard him, she put her head on his shoulder. 'We're playing D&D, I think. Dustin's gonna be there, and Will... and Lucas and Max. Sound fun?'

El nodded happily. 'And can I stay over?'

Mike sighed. 'Probably not. I don't think my parents would allow that any more. Even if Hopper spoke to them about the fact that you're not a crazy Russian spy... I don't think your Dad would let you stay over.'

'Why not? I could take your sleeping bag and sleep in my den like before,' El offered.

Mike smiled. 'Because it's different now.'

El looked at their intertwined hands on the blanket. 'Because you're my... boyfriend?'

Mike's heart leapt. It felt so amazing to hear her say it... but strange at the same time. 'Yeah, because I'm your boyfriend.' He felt the electricity between them once again and couldn't stop himself from kissing her once more. 'Parents get so weird about teenagers spending time together when they get older. They think we're gonna do stupid stuff.'

'Like what?' El asked.

Mike laughed. 'You'll find out at some point, but I'm not going to tell you that stuff.'

'Why?'

'Ask... ask Mrs Byers.'

El shrugged, 'Okay.'

Mike spotted a pile of books on the coffee table in front of them. 'Have you read all of these?'

El smiled, 'No, but I start reading them.'

'You're going to start,' Mike corrected gently.

'I'm going to start reading them,' El rephrased, her eyes twinkling.

Mike flicked through the books, 'Hey! The Hobbit!'

El smiled. 'You like?'

Mike took the book from the pile and started to flick through it. 'One of my favourites. Me, Will, Dustin and Lucas used to play Lord of the Rings in the woods by Mrs Byers' house. It was awesome.'

'Mike?'

'Yeah?'

'Can you read it to me?'

'Er... sure,' Mike replied with a shy grin, his stomach bubbling with happiness.

El got up from the sofa, and went into her bedroom, pulling the duvet off her bed and bringing it into the living room. She put her feet up on the coffee table, and Mike did the same. Then, she arranged the duvet over the two of them, curling up on his chest. Mike slid his hand into hers and they held the book cover together and Mike started to read.

Neither of them heard Hopper's jeep pull up outside for when he entered the cabin, they had fallen asleep in each other's arms, the book open in Mike's hand. Mike's head lopped forward onto Eleven's mop of curly brown hair, and Hopper couldn't help but notice how peaceful El looked laid on his chest.

Even though he was pissed that Mike had come over, uninvited and unannounced... (the Byers kid was really terrible at lying), Hop had to admit that he never thought Mike would cross the line with El. He was a good kid and as much as Hop hated to admit it to himself... it was clear that he loved the bones of El.

6. Chapter 6

Chapter six

Mike's eyes flickered open, then widened in panic. Hopper was sat in the armchair in the corner of the living room, looking at him, beer in hand. 'Shit!' Mike cried. He stood up abruptly, waking El and throwing off the duvet covers.

El stirred sleepily. 'What?'

'Shit, I'm so sorry. I fell asleep. We fell asleep. I fell asleep. Shit!' He looked outside. It was still dark. Mike checked his watch. It was 8.30pm. Mike grabbed his coat. 'I'll go! Now-' Mike made for the door.

'Mike, wait!' El called.

Hop got to his feet. 'Hold on a sec, kid!'

Mike froze in his tracks, turning to face Hopper, wincing inside. He walked slowly back to the living room, stopping at the back of the sofa, El sat in front of him.

'Look, kid, I'm not mad that you're here.'

'You're not?' El asked, confused.

Hop shook his head and took a deep breath, draining his beer. 'Look, kids, I know you've missed each other, and it hasn't been easy on you the last few weeks...' Mike felt colour rushing into his face and clenched the sofa for support, '.. all I ask is that you're honest with me, all right? No sneaking around, no secret meetings...'

'But he-' El interrupted, but Hop silenced her with one look.

'No secret meetings. And a few boundaries.'

'Boundaries?' El asked.

'Ground rules,' Mike supplied, still feeling sick with nerves. Hopper

was commanding at the worst of times... but now he was dating his daughter...? Should they tell Hopper that they were officially dating? Was that how it was meant to work? He swallowed hard.

'Number one: You can see each other, and the other kids too, but only at the Byers place... and here.'

'But I-' Mike began, but he too was silenced by Hop.

'Number two: No sleepovers.'

'Not even at the Byers'?' Mike asked quietly.

Hop thought a moment. 'Maybe only when I'm there...'

El and Mike exchanged looks.

'Wait, what? Never mind.' El and Mike giggled. Hopper pointed at each of them in turn. 'Separate bedrooms.'

'Are you Joyce's *boyfriend*?' El smiled widely. Mike couldn't help but touch El's shoulders and smile. Hopper was squirming.

'This isn't about me, kid, all right? This is about you two and your sneaking around.'

'Number three. El isn't El, anymore. Her name is Jane. *Jane Hopper*.'

'What?' El and Mike asked together.

'Doc Owens gave me this last week, El, I've been waiting for the right time to tell you. It seems that would be now. It seems right that Mike should know too.' Hop reached inside his jacket and produced a piece of paper, giving it to El.

'I'm not Eleven?' El asked, looking at the birth certificate before her.

Mike leaned over her shoulder. 'Teresa Ives?'

'Mama,' El confirmed.

'That's your Mother?' Mike asked.

El nodded.

'It's really important that you call her Jane, now, all right, kid? Anything else will raise a suspicion and could link back to the lab, which we don't want.'

'Jane,' El repeated, looking back at Mike.

'Jane,' said Mike. Their faces were close again. He wanted to kiss her, *again*. He drew away, removing the temptation. 'It's pretty, I like it.' El beamed.

Hop headed into the kitchen and retrieved another beer from the fridge. Mike cleared his throat. 'Chief, I'm really sorry about everything, all right? I just wanted to see her. I thought it would be safer if I came here, instead of her coming into Hawkins to my place.'

Hopper pointed the beer can at Mike. 'You're right about that.'

El got up from the sofa and joined Hopper and Mike in the kitchen. 'So, no sleepovers. No seeing anyone apart from here or at the Byers. And Jane. Everything else?'

'Anything else,' Hopper corrected.

'Anything else?'

Hopper thought a moment and then looked hard at Mike, then at El. 'I know I'm gonna regret asking this but are you two...' He trailed off. 'Never mind, I don't wanna know.'

'Mike's my boyfriend,' El said happily.

Hopper took another swig of beer. 'Yup, that's what I didn't wanna know.'

Mike went a distinct shade of pink. 'Chief, I promise, I won't do anything without your permission...'

Hopper spat out his beer.

Mike's eyes widened, realising how that had sounded. 'Wait! No! I

didn't mean that, I just meant- Oh shit, this is all coming out wrong!

'Keep digging, kid,' Hop said, a clipped humour to his voice.

Mike sighed, 'I just meant... I will respect your rules. I *promise*. And I'll only see El when you tell me to. I just... today was different. We just got out for the holidays, and you said I could come tomorrow but Dustin, Lucas and Will are coming round to play D&D...'

Hop nodded. Another swig of beer. 'Yeah, Will said.' He thought a moment and turned to El. 'Do you wanna go?'

El nodded with a small smile. 'Yes, I want to go.'

Hop looked out of the door absent mindedly. 'Look, I got an idea... what IF... you did your D&D thing at the Byers house tomorrow?'

Mike's face brightened. 'Really? And El could come?'

'I could go?' El's eyes twinkled.

Hop smiled sternly. 'I'm going to the Byers' tomorrow anyway. I might take Joyce out and get something to eat in town... but your sister and Jonathan will need to be there.'

Mike's insides were dancing. He had never thought in a million years that Hop would let El come for an evening with them. He made a mental note to tell Will that he was definitely right about Hopper and Mrs Byers though. He frowned. 'Gross.'

'What?' Hop noted.

'Nothing,' Mike said quickly. 'That's awesome. Thanks Hopper.'

'Chief.'

'Chief. I should never have come today, I'm sorry.' Mike grabbed his coat, already looking forward to seeing El again tomorrow.

'I'll give you a ride home, kid,' Hop said.

Mike's insides suddenly wretched. Maybe the nice guy act was all a

show for El and the real punishment would come when they were alone, in the car.

'Okay, um, thanks,' Mike stammered. He turned to El, desperately wanting to kiss her goodbye, but knowing there was no way in hell he could do that with Hopper there. He smiled at her warmly, 'Night El. See you tomorrow.'

El's eyes smiled back. 'Night Mike.'

Hop grabbed his keys. 'I'll be back in half an hour.'

Mike stole one last look at El before leaving the cabin, an impending sense of doom overtaking his thoughts. He grabbed his bike and Hopper took it from him, putting it on the back seat of the jeep. He got into the front seat, thinking it best to stay quiet.

Hop got in the drivers seat, started the engine and they started to drive. Mike fiddled with his hands nervously, before he could bear it no longer. 'I'm really sorry, Chief.'

'You said that already.'

Silence.

'I really like her.'

'Yeah I got that from when you tried to break my ribs last month,' Hop's voice was stern but a smile curled his lips.

'Sorry.'

Hopper sighed. 'Look kid, I don't have a problem with you two seeing each other. You're a good kid, she needs friends. God knows I kept her from you all for long enough.' Mike stayed silent as Hopper went on, 'But you're thirteen years old. I don't want any *funny business*. Jeez, I can't believe I'm saying this-'

Mike's eyes widened, 'No, seriously! No, I promise, nothing like that!'

'Glad to hear it.'

Mike heaved a sigh of relief, feeling like he was finally making progress. They approached the edge of Hawkins. The smells of his Mum's cooking filtered through into the car as they pulled up outside his house, and his stomach growled with hunger, as he realised he hadn't eaten yet. He made to get out of the car but Hopper grabbed his arm-

'Break her heart, I break your face.'

Mike nodded nervously. 'Yes, Sir.' Hopper released his arm, but then smiled. 'Glad we had this talk, Wheeler.'

'Sure thing, Chief.'

7. Chapter 7

Author note: This chapter is a little bit longer than my others...the dialogue between the boys flowed really well when I was writing and before I knew it, the chapter was 1000 odd words longer. Apologies! Hope you enjoy!

Chapter seven

'Okay, so who's the bad guy?' Dustin asked, poised over his manual, his hand deep in a bag of Cheetos on Will's bed. Mike was to his right but by the window, looking out onto the Byers' drive. It was dark. Lucas was at the end of Will's bed, poring over his own manual. Will was on the bed with Dustin, drawing in his sketchbook.

Lucas looked up from his own manual, thoughtfully chewing on a pencil. He looked carefully at Dustin. 'How about Baphomet?'

'The bull's head guy?' Will asked with a frown.

'Not epic enough,' Mike said absently, not taking his eyes off the window.

Dustin laughed, putting his manual down. 'You mean that your girlfriend could squish Baphomet with her mind so there's really no point in us trying?'

Lucas laughed, Will sniggered and Mike suddenly paid attention. 'No I didn't mean... wait.. *what?*'

'Son of a bitch, Mike,' said Dustin, rolling his eyes. 'You've been glued to the window for the past hour. The girls aren't coming for another half hour.'

'He's on El watch,' Lucas grinned.

Mike got defensive, but didn't leave the window. 'So what if I am? You'd be tense too if the Chief warned you off his daughter.'

'He warned you off?' Dustin asked, looking a little perturbed.

Mike sighed. 'Not exactly. More a kind of threat.'

'Much better,' Will laughed, taking a slurp of his Coca Cola can.

'I don't envy you, man,' Lucas put in. 'My Dad said the Chief fought in 'Nam.'

Dustin's eyes widened. 'What if he interrogates you? Did you see *Deer Hunter*? That shit was *insane*.'

Mike suddenly looked worried. 'Seriously?'

Will straightened, tucking in to Dustin's Cheetos. 'I don't know what you're so worried about. He might be my *Step-Dad*.'

'Shit you're right!' Lucas jibed. 'And you would be-'

'El's brother,' Mike nodded. 'God this is too weird.' He resumed his previous stance looking out of the window.

Dustin returned to his manual, poring over pictures of various monsters, but couldn't concentrate. He opened a nougat bar and took a big bite, pointing at Mike with the wrapper. 'What did the Chief say, *exactly*?'

Mike squinted through the dark, looking for any sign of the familiar lights of Hopper's jeep. 'Just that we could only hang out with El at the cabin or here.'

'I have no desire to go back there,' Will said quietly.

Mike turned sensitively to Will. 'I never thought, that's where-'

'They got the Mind Flayer out of me,' Will whispered.

Dustin and Lucas went quiet. Dustin patted Will on the shoulder lightly. 'You okay, man?'

Will nodded. 'I'm fine. A little weirded out but fine. Here's not much better if you think about it. Here's where-

'The demo-dogs came to kill us,' Lucas recalled. 'We're gonna be in

therapy till we're thirty.'

Dustin nodded in agreement. 'What else did Hopper say, Mike?'

Mike thought a moment. 'Oh, he said we have to call El, *Jane*.'

'Jane?' the boys said together.

Mike nodded. 'Jane. Hopper's adopted her... I think. She's Jane Hopper now.'

'Yeah, before she's Jane *Wheeler*,' Lucas jibed.

'Shut up, Lucas,' Mike rolled his eyes. 'Like you and Max haven't picked out your kids' names yet!'

'Ew gross!' Lucas snorted.

'Surprised you guys have taken your tongues out of each other's mouths long enough to even have a conversation,' Dustin said pointedly, meeting Will and Mike's laughing eyes with a smile.

Lucas flushed pink beneath his chocolate skin. 'We have, too!'

'Oh yeah, when?' Dustin asked.

'You remember when we got the demo-dogs by the junkyard, right before Steve went out with his bat? We were talking about her family and stuff.'

'You did?' Will asked.

'Yeah,' Lucas said, smiling shyly. 'It was kinda cool, actually.' Lucas' face took on a serious note. 'Her brother's such a jerk.'

Dustin grinned widely. 'Yeah and she's such a bad ass for jamming the needle in his neck!'

'She did *what*?' Will asked, incredulous.

'Oh my god, it was so awesome,' Lucas filled in excitedly. 'When your Mom and Jonathan took you to the cabin, Billy came round to get Max. He and Steve had this massive fight-'

'It was unreal,' Mike agreed with a nod.

'And he pretty much knocked Steve out cold,' Dustin put in. 'But then Max came in-'

'And jabbed his neck with a syringe,' Lucas concluded with a wide grin. 'My girlfriend is so badass.'

'Compared to Eleven?' Will asked with a raised eyebrow.

Mike smiled.

'Max is a different kind of bad ass. She's just really cool,' Lucas said softly.

Dustin smiled faintly. 'She is. Plus she kicks all of our asses on Dig Dug.'

Lucas held his head in his hands. 'Jeez, we owe Keith about a million dates with Nancy.'

Mike took a chocolate bar from their stash of snacks on Will's bed and began to eat it. 'Good luck with that, she's off sucking face with Jonathan. I can't believe they have to be here tonight as well.'

Will shrugged. 'Jonathan's not so bad. I think they'll probably just be in his room listening to music or something.'

'Listening to music?' Dustin laughed. 'Will, you're so innocent, man.'

'What? That's what they were doing the other day when I went in to ask him how to get Mike to the cabin while Hopper was here.'

'Whoa, wait a minute!' Lucas cut in, raising his hands, looking up at Mike. 'Hopper was here...You were alone with Eleven in the cabin?!'

'Cabin of love,' Dustin grinned, nodding.

It was Mike's turn to flush red. He didn't really want to share the details of reading *The Hobbit* with El and then falling asleep with her. He felt sure they would make fun of him. The thought of feeling El cuddled up next to him made his heart swell. 'It's not a big deal,' he

dismissed.

'Your face says otherwise,' Lucas noted.

'How far did you get?' Dustin asked eagerly.

Will went red. 'Guys, maybe Mike doesn't want to tell us how-'

Mike sighed. 'Will's right... that stuff is... it's private.'

Lucas folded his arms. 'Fine, we'll ask El.' Dustin nodded in agreement.

Mike's eyes widened. He didn't know whether El would know to keep what they had done together a secret. That was a boyfriend and girlfriend thing, and El wasn't exactly well versed in dating etiquette. 'No, it's just... I don't know...this thing with El.. it's sort of...' Mike struggled to articulate just exactly what his relationship with El was... he knew how he felt about her... he was pretty sure he was falling in love with her...if that's what this nervous tingling feeling was whenever he thought of her... but he couldn't tell the guys that. No way. 'It's just different, that's all.'

'Different than what?' asked Lucas.

Mike shrugged. 'I don't know...' His insides squirmed. 'More than a crush?'

'Holy shit, you love her, don't you?' Dustin cried.

'Keep your voice down!' Mike snapped.

'HA! Mike Wheeler in love with a superhero...'

'Guys, please,' Mike said. 'Don't tell her, all right? I don't know what I'm meant to do or say. Hopper's on my back with all these rules and stuff and it's not like any of us are exactly *experienced* with girls...'

Will nodded in agreement. 'He's right. I had no idea what the hell I was doing at the Snow Ball.'

'None of us did,' Dustin agreed. 'Give me fifty Demo-dogs over Stacey.'

Jeez, what a bitch.'

Lucas laughed, 'Did you see me ask Max to dance? She must have thought I was such a loser.'

The boys all grinned in agreement. Mike felt better. 'See? I haven't a clue what to do. I mean, we've *kissed* a couple of times and that's been great, but actually going out with her... I don't know what to do or say.'

Will smiled softly. 'I don't think you need to think about it so much. Eleven obviously likes you.'

Mike nodded and smiled, his insides squirming with nerves again. 'I think she does.'

'You think?' Lucas asked. 'She's just as crazy about you as you are about her. I don't know though... I wouldn't say the L word just yet though, man.'

'Why?' asked Dustin. 'Steve said you have to be aggressive sometimes. You have to let them know how you feel.'

'Steve also said your hair looked great last week,' Lucas threw back.

'Bite me,' Dustin retorted.

Mike nodded. 'I think Lucas is right. I don't know, I don't wanna scare her off, but I need to make sure that she really knows how much I like her. I mean, she said she wants to be my girlfriend, so that's gotta be a good thing, right?'

'Definitely,' Will said with a smile.

'But the thing is, Eleven doesn't even know stuff,' Mike said, feeling his cheeks go pink again.

'What kind of stuff?' Lucas frowned... but then it dawned on him. 'What, sex stuff?'

Mike nodded. 'Right.'

Dustin raised his eyebrows. 'Nothing?'

Mike shook his head. 'Nothing.'

'Oh man,' Dustin shook his head at Mike. 'You're in trouble.'

'I know, right?'

Will thought a moment. 'Maybe we could ask my Mom to talk to her?'

Mike nodded. 'That's what I was thinking.' He thought a moment and then looked at Lucas. 'How about Max?'

Lucas raised his eyebrows. 'You want me to ask my girlfriend to teach your girlfriend about sex? I don't think so, man.'

Mike sighed heavily. 'I don't know. It's so frustrating sometimes. Brenner really messed everything up for her. Imagine how different things would be if she'd just had a normal family, like us.'

'Do you think you'd still like her?' Dustin asked.

Mike frowned. 'What do you mean?'

Dustin took another chocolate bar. 'Well, say Eleven was just like everyone else. Say she hung out with Stacey, or Sarah, or any of the other girls. Do you think you'd still like her?'

Mike flushed pink. 'Of course I would, she's amazing.'

The boys sniggered. Lucas was thoughtful. He pointed to Mike. 'Ah... but would Eleven like you?'

The question hung in the air and Mike bit his lip, deep in thought. Would she? Would Eleven really like him if they hadn't hung out every night? If she hadn't stayed at his house? If she hadn't become so dependent on him? Something inside him twisted uncomfortably. As though everything he thought he had with El had been swept away from underneath him.

'Boys!' The silence that lingered in the room following Lucas' question was broken by Joyce calling down the hall. 'Max is here!'

'Coming Mom!' Will called. Lucas and Dustin grinned and left Will's bedroom.

Something prickled Mike's eyes and made his jaw ache. Will touched Mike's shoulder lightly, as though knowing what Mike was thinking. 'You'll feel better when you see her.' Will left the room to go down the hall and Mike heard the distant sounds of Max and her Mom greeting Lucas, Dustin and Joyce.

Mike frowned at the room. He hated this shit. Everything was so confusing. One moment he could be feeling so happy he felt he might burst and the next, he would feel like the world was ending. He thought about El again – her big brown eyes, her thick hazel curls, the way she said his name. *Mike*. He thought of her shy smile when they'd been laid on the sofa together the previous day. His stomach swooped. He thought of that blazing look in her eye right before she had kissed him when he'd started babbling... there was definitely something special between them... but why did she like him?

He looked at himself in Will's mirror, clenching his fists. He was lanky, his jumper was stupid, he *hated* his hair and Troy was right, he did have a frog face...He approached the mirror, running his hands through his hair, trying to mess it up a bit. 'Great, now I have bed hair,' he said to himself, trying to undo the damage.

'Mike, what are you doing?'

Nancy poked her head around the door, her lips curled into a smirk.

Mike rolled his eyes. 'None of your business.'

'Max is here,' she said lightly, coming into Will's room and sitting down on the bed.

'Yeah I know,' Mike snapped.

Nancy frowned. 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing.'

Nancy smiled genuinely. 'Mike, there's *obviously* something bothering you as you're in here sulking while your friends are in the other

room.' Mike remained quiet but Nancy sighed... 'Is this about Eleven?'

'What? No, of course not,' Mike said, knowing full well that he hadn't been very convincing.

Nancy raised her eyebrows. 'Sure it's not.'

Mike sighed uncomfortably. She couldn't make him feel any worse, right? 'I don't know why Eleven likes me.'

Nancy frowned with a light smile on her lips. 'What?'

Mike placed himself in front of the mirror. 'Seriously, I mean, look at me. I look like a frog, my hair is a mess. It's not like I'm Tom Cruise, you know?'

Nancy got off the bed and shook her head. 'Mike you're thinking about this all wrong.'

'I am?'

She nodded. 'The reasons why Eleven likes you... and she does like you... they have nothing to do with the way you look.'

'Nothing?'

Nancy shrugged. 'Well maybe not nothing, but it's not all about that.'

'It's not?'

Nancy shook her head and made for the door. 'Nope.'

'Then what is it about?' Mike asked thoughtfully.

'The way you make her feel,' she smiled, walking back out into the hall.

Mike's stomach dipped nervously but he couldn't help but smile.

Lights streamed through the curtains into Will's room. He rushed over to the window and looked out. The Chief's jeep. Two car doors slammed and two figures walked towards the house. One tall, one short. Mike felt that familiar feeling of electricity shoot up and down

his body. The feeling he always got when El was near. He grinned, took a deep breath, and left Will's room.

8. Chapter 8

Chapter eight

Mike made his way down the hall, the Byers' tiny living room was crowded with people. Dustin and Lucas were chatting with Max on the sofa, Will was talking with Jonathan and Nancy, Max's Mom was chatting animatedly with Joyce on the edge of the kitchen to his right and then...

The door opened and Hopper and El walked in. El's eyes locked with his immediately and she smiled in that coy way she did. She was wearing a red toggle coat with a cream scarf and hat, her chocolate curls edging round her face. Mike's heart burst, feeling the familiar nervous flutter in his stomach.

'Wheeler,' said Hop, taking off his coat, armed with a large pizza box.

Mike bit his lip, walking towards Hopper and El. 'Hi Chief,' he said nervously.

'Hi Mike,' El said, smiling, taking off her coat.

'Hey,' Mike said softly, hungrily finding her, wanting desperately to kiss her again. Every time he kissed her, it felt like the first time he had ever kissed her. Excited, scared, nervous, but mostly excited. He already couldn't wait for Hopper and Joyce to be gone.

Hopper placed the pizza box down on the coffee table and joined Joyce and Susan Hargrove in the kitchen. El walked up to Mike and slid her hand into his. Mike's whole body tingled at her touch.

Mike kept his hand in El's and walked over to Lucas, Dustin and Max. 'Hey Max.'

Max looked up cautiously at Mike and El. 'Hey Wheeler...Hi El.'

Mike cleared his throat. This needed to be sorted, once and for all, and he had to lead the way. Dustin and Lucas looked at Mike expectantly. 'Max, I'm really sorry I was such a dick to you... when you first got here.'

'Yeah, you were,' Max confirmed, but she was smiling.

Mike nodded. 'Yeah, I just...I was an idiot, and I'm really sorry.'

'Gotta agree with you there, Mike,' Max said. 'But apology accepted.'

Mike nodded. 'Good. Cool.'

El smiled gently, 'I'm sorry, too.' She held her hand out to Max. 'Friends?'

Max reddened but looked touched. She shook El's outstretched hand. 'Friends.'

Lucas and Dustin grinned happily. 'Awesome.'

Will left Jonathan and Nancy with a knowing grin on his face, coming to join his friends by the sofa. The party looked at him inquisitively but he gestured for them to remain quiet. Hopper had approached them.

'Joyce and I are giving Susan a lift into town and getting something to eat. We'll be back in a couple of hours, all right?' Hop said, shooting Mike a warning look. 'You answer the door to *no-one*. You hear?'

Dustin laughed. 'It's cool, even if something happened, we could just use El.'

Hopper's face fell. 'No, no way and never. In that order.'

Lucas nodded. 'He was just joking, Chief.'

They nodded in unison. Joyce cut through the group and gave Will a hug. 'Bye sweetie. If you need anything...'

'Tell Jonathan, I know,' Will nodded. 'I'm really fine now, Mom.'

Joyce smiled widely. 'I know, sweetie.'

'Bye Maxine!' Susan Hargrove called, heading for the door, along with Joyce.

'Bye Mom,' Max said quietly.

Mike stepped away from El as Hopper enveloped her in a hug and kissed the top of her head. 'See you soon, all right?'

'Soon,' El smiled.

Hopper, Joyce and Susan made for the door, but Mike felt Hopper's eyes on him once again. 'We'll be back around nine thirty, you hear?' he said.

'Nine-three-oh,' El said.

Hopper smiled. 'Nine-three-oh. Eat pizza, watch movies, play Goblins and Monsters or whatever it-'

'Dungeons and Dragons,' the boys recited together.

'Whatever,' Hop said, closing the door behind him.

Nancy folded her arms, watching as the adults got into the car and drove away. 'They're so dating.'

Jonathan nodded, 'Told you.'

Will smiled, 'I think it's good. Hopper's always been good to Mom, and he's been great after Bob.'

Nancy frowned. 'Don't you think it's too soon, though? I mean, your Mom was with Bob for like... what?'

Jonathan thought. 'Maybe eight months? He did really love her, I guess. I dunno, I always got the impression that he liked her more than she liked him.'

'Bob...' El said thoughtfully, kneeling down in front of the coffee table and helping herself to some pizza. 'Bob the Brain?'

The boys took El's lead and took a slice. Jonathan sat down in the armchair and Nancy sat between his legs. Jonathan squeezed her shoulders affectionately and she smiled. Mike looked at them and his palms began to sweat. They made it look so easy.

'I think that's what they used to call him, yeah,' Jonathan smiled. 'How did you know that?'

El shrugged. 'My Dad used to talk about him. I think he was...' she paused but then looked up at Mike knowingly. 'Jealous,' she finished proudly, remembering the word.

Nancy smiled. 'Well that makes sense.' She reached over and grabbed a slice of pizza for herself. 'I think I remember someone at the station saying Hopper and your Mom used to date in high school.'

Max nodded. 'When we were here the night El came back, I thought it was so obvious.'

'It was?' Will asked, his mouth full of pizza. Mike noticed that every so often, he was very interested in what happened after they left the lab, when he was out of it. He felt sad for his friend... there were quite big parts of their adventure that he had never experienced. Will had never been as close to Eleven as the rest of them... he didn't really know her at all.

Jonathan nodded. 'Yeah, it was. Hopper's a good guy. I don't know, it's just weird, I guess.'

Nancy smiled. 'If he makes your Mom happy, that's gotta be a good thing, right?'

'And the Chief is great,' Mike said quickly, sitting down beside El.

Lucas laughed, 'Mike, he's not here anymore, you don't need to suck up to him.'

'I know,' Mike blurted, but El was smiling at him regardless.

'Listen, anyway,' Nancy cleared her throat. 'Now, Joyce and Hopper can't know but-'

Jonathan smiled, 'Nancy and I also have a date planned tonight.'

'You do?' Dustin, Lucas and Mike said together. Mike exchanged looks with Will and grinned.

'So we get to be on our own?' Mike blurted out. Dustin and Lucas sniggered and Mike's face went a dusky pink. El also blushed.

'Not exactly,' Nancy smiled.

Right on cue, there was a knock at the door and Jonathan called out, 'Come in, it's open!'

Steve Harrington strode into the Byers' living room, carrying another large pizza in one arm and balancing a stack of videos in the other. 'Evening shitheads.'

'No way!' Dustin called out, grinning widely and getting to his feet immediately. 'Steve! My man!' Dustin took the videos from Steve and gave him a high five, followed by a fist bump. Mike sniggered. They had their own secret handshake. That said, Mike had to admit, Steve's presence in the living room didn't entirely suck. He was pretty cool now.

Nancy smiled at Steve, saying gently, 'Thanks so much for doing this, Steve.'

Jonathan shook Steve's hand. 'Yeah, man, thank you. We really appreciate it.'

'No problem,' Steve smiled. 'Have a good time.' Mike noticed that there was a note of sadness in his voice. He couldn't imagine what it would be like to want to be with someone and have them be with someone else. He looked at El who had moved into Dustin's seat and was listening to Max chat to Lucas.

Jonathan and Nancy locked the door behind them and Steve turned to the boys, El and Max.

'Okay, I got *Jaws*, *Blade Runner*, *Halloween* and *Indiana Jones*. Pick your poison,' Steve said, heading for the fridge to get some juice.

Max got to her feet, 'I'm gonna go get in my pyjamas.'

'Me too,' Lucas announced. Mike noticed Max had Lucas' hand and they followed each other into the hall.

Coming straight from the kitchen, Steve rolled his eyes and put a hand on Lucas' shoulder. 'I don't think so, Sinclair. Give the lady some space... Max down the hall to the left, Lucas, to your right.'

'Come on, man!' Lucas protested.

Max smirked, grabbed her bag and went down the hall.

Steve downed his juice. 'You're thirteen, Sinclair. Go in there while she's changing and your ass is grass, you got it?'

'Busted,' beamed Dustin. 'I'm gonna go too, guys.'

Will looked briefly at Mike. Mike returned his look with a nervous smile. Mike knew that just like that, Will understood that he wanted to be alone with El. Will grinned, 'Yeah, me too.'

Dustin and Will headed down the hall. 'Err.. Steve,' came Dustin's voice. 'Lucas has been quite liberal with his interpretation of your rules...'

Steve rolled his eyes and headed down the hall.

Mike got up and went to sit next to El on the sofa and hesitated momentarily before deciding to take her hand. 'Hey.'

El squinted at him, seeming to notice something was amiss. She frowned. 'Are you okay?'

Mike ran a hand through his hair, his heart beating so loudly he felt that she would surely hear it. 'Yeah, of course,' he nodded. 'Yeah, I'm fine.'

She tilted her head in towards him. 'Mike,' she said softly. 'Friends don't lie.'

Mike sighed. 'It's nothing, it's... it's just something Lucas said that's all.'

El wrinkled her nose with a small smile and slumped back on the sofa. 'Lucas?' She started to stroke Mike's arm... Mike closed his eyes for a moment, it felt amazing.

He shook his head, shaking himself out of his El-induced trance. He slumped back on the sofa, mirroring her pose, holding the ends of her fingers in his own. 'Yeah, we were just talking about what it would have been like if you were just in school with us, you know? Like, if you'd always been around?'

El smiled widely. 'That would have been nice.'

Mike bit his lip. 'Yeah...' He heaved a deep sigh. 'El...'

'Yes?'

'Why do you like me?'

El frowned. 'What?'

Mike sighed, squeezing her hand tightly. 'I don't know. Sometimes I just feel like... you're too good for me, you know? I mean, like I said on the night of the Snow Ball, guys like me don't get girlfriends like you.'

'What do you mean?' El said quietly, looking at her hand in Mike's.

'Well, look at me, El,' Mike said sadly. 'And I mean, you're so beautiful, and you're so smart and so funny, and I feel like...you understand me, you know?'

'Why do I like you?' El asked, still looking a little puzzled.

'Yeah,' Mike said. 'I mean, not like me like you like Dustin, or Lucas. Like me... more, you know?'

'I understand,' El said softly. Without another word, she touched his lips lightly with her own. Mike closed his eyes. It seemed that whenever El kissed him, he forgot anything had ever bothered him.

El drew away and looked at her hand in Mike's again. 'I like you more because you're kind to me.' Mike smiled shyly. El went on, 'I like you more because you don't make me feel... different.'

Mike frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'At the Snow Ball, you ask me to dance. I don't know how. You say, you don't know how. So, we do it together. We do things *together*. *Always*.'

El looked again at his hand in hers. 'I like you more because you keep a promise.' Mike grinned, lifting his other arm over the back of the sofa, above her. He touched her curls softly. He *loved* her hair. El's face grew serious. She touched her hair. 'I look like a boy.'

'El, you don't, you-'

'With you... I'm...' She smiled distantly and looked up at Mike with her big brown eyes. Mike's heart melted. 'With you, I'm pretty.'

She touched Mike's chest with her hand, a little breathless. 'You make me feel... pretty.'

'You are pretty, El,' Mike whispered. 'You are beautiful.'

El smiled shyly. 'I think you are beautiful.'

Mike could stand it no longer. He held her cheek and kissed her, long and hard, his worries floating away like clouds in the sky. He drew away, a little breathless, resting his forehead against hers. El's eyes were still closed but she was smiling.

'Whooooooooooooop! Whooooooooooooop!'

'Hallelujah!'

'Finally!'

Mike and El broke apart to see that their conversation had been both seen and heard by Lucas, Dustin, Will, Max and Steve, gathered at the end of the hallway, all grinning like cheshire cats.

Steve sighed, swooping in to take a slice of pizza. 'Here's me thinking I needed to be watching Sinclair and Hargrove, when I should have been watching Wheeler and Eleven.'

'Jane,' El corrected Steve, with a smile.

'Jane?' Steve repeated, frowning.

'Jane,' recited the boys.

'Screw that, I'm going with El.' Steve grabbed *Indiana Jones* and thrust it into the VCR, looking back at Dustin, Lucas, Max and Will. 'Are you shitheads just gonna stand there?'

Max took a slice of pizza from the box that Steve had brought and sat where Nancy had previously sat in front of the armchair. 'Just do us a favour you two and keep the PDAs to a minimum, yeah?'

Mike laughed. 'Oh, look who's talking!'

'He's got a point, Max,' Dustin laughed, taking a slice of pizza for himself.

Max rolled her eyes and kicked Lucas' foot while he got himself some pizza. 'Err.. ow!' Lucas exclaimed.

'I told you we needed to be more private,' Max said quietly, gritting her teeth.

Lucas held a hand up. 'I just must be irresistible,' he laughed.

'Not exactly humble, are you stalker?' she said, smiling.

Lucas took Jonathan's seat on the armchair, one leg either side of Max. Steve had retrieved a few pillows from Will's bedroom and laid on the floor with Dustin and Will.

Mike was torn between frustration that they'd all heard a very private moment between him and El, and happiness at the moment itself. His heart was still swelling from their kiss. She made him feel so... wanted. Every night he'd called her, hoping that one day, he might get to see her again. But holding her, kissing her...This was so much more than anything he could ever have imagined.

As though El had heard him, she laid her head on his chest and curled her legs up on the sofa, and began to watch the movie. Mike put one arm along her back and the other laid casually on his knee. He put his feet up on the coffee table and laid his head back, finally

able to relax. He kissed the top of her head gently as the credits rolled.

There was no doubt about it, he was in love with Eleven. How long would he have to wait to tell her? The boys had said he should wait...but could he? The word tingled throughout his body, a secret he was desperate to share.

9. Chapter 9

Chapter nine

They had arrived. Mike, Lucas and Dustin parked their bikes and turned, hearing a car pull up behind them.

'Back in two hours, you hear?' Joyce called through her car window.

Will left the car, grinning. 'Yes, Mom!'

Dustin held up an arm, 'Thanks for the sleepover last night Mrs Byers!'

'Yeah, thank you!' Lucas said with a smile.

Mike smiled and waved the car away, and gave Will a friendly nudge as he joined them. 'Thanks for coming, guys.'

Lucas nodded in agreement. 'Yeah, thank you.'

Dustin laughed, putting one arm around Lucas, and the other around Mike as they walked towards their destination. 'It's okay guys. We are in uncharted territory here. It's only right we tread this path together.'

The boys looked up at their destination. A place they had never entered before. *Darling – Women's Clothing and Accessories Store*.

Mike turned to the boys. 'Let's be clear. We're here for one thing and one thing only.'

'Affirmative,' Lucas said.

Will nodded. 'What if they don't have anything nice?'

'Then me and Lucas are screwed,' Mike winced.

Dustin rolled his eyes. 'You guys are the ones that left it till the *day before* Christmas Eve to get presents for your girlfriends! Amateurs!'

Mike sighed, 'Look, I really feel like I should do this, guys. It'll be my way of telling Eleven... you know...'

'That you love her?' Dustin put in.

'Right,' Mike agreed.

'Without actually telling her and scaring her off,' Lucas finished. He touched his head. 'I'm not sure what I'm gonna get for Max. It's not like she's girly...' He checked his watch. 'And I have to meet her in two hours.'

Will tentatively stepped forward. 'Mike, isn't that your sister?'

Mike froze. *Great.* If it wasn't bad enough that Nancy had had a knowing look in her eye when she'd returned from her date with Jonathan the previous night to find El and Mike curled up together on the sofa... when she discovered he was *shopping* for a present for her... he was easy bait for sure.

The boys didn't move, and sure enough, Nancy emerged from the store, wearing a light blue coat and white scarf and gloves. She smiled. 'Boys... what are you doing here?'

'They're shopping for Eleven and Max,' Dustin blurted.

Mike punched Dustin in the ribs.

'What?' Dustin asked, incredulous. 'She could help us, right, Nance?'

Nancy thought a moment. 'I will help you shop *if* and only *if*, you do my chores for a month...'

'A month?' Mike repeated, outraged. A month doing Nancy's chores meant time away from El... and his friends. Time that he felt sure would be few and far between in the new year. Hopper was only being so generous because of Christmas. He was sure of it... but then again... 'Two weeks?' he offered.

'Make it three and we've got a deal,' Nancy held out her hand and Mike shook it. Nancy turned to Lucas. 'With Max, we've got a problem.. I don't know her so well.'

'I know,' Lucas said.

Will sighed, 'Look guys, can we go inside before we all freeze to death?'

The bell on the shop door gave a cheerful jingle as the boys stepped inside. Tinny pop music played inside the store, a woman's voice Mike recognised from the music that often played in Nancy's room. 'Let's just get what we need and leave, all right?'

Nancy smiled. 'You can't rush something like this, Mike, it's important.'

Mike groaned. 'Why?'

'Jane needs to know you've thought about what to buy her. Something feminine, I think.'

Mike knew that Nancy was right. It had pained him to hear that Eleven thought that she looked like a boy, so getting her something ridiculously girly was a great idea. He smiled inside... *and he made her feel pretty*. He still couldn't get used to the name Jane, though. Even though he liked it... she was... El. She'd always be El.

Dustin and Lucas were wandering, wide eyed and gawking into the underwear section. 'What the *hell* is this?' Dustin asked Nancy, picking up a large cup sized bra with one strap.

Nancy was horrified. 'Put that down!'

Will laughed. 'You could use it as a catapult!'

Lucas nodded in agreement. 'This place is *insane*!'

Nancy snatched the bra from Dustin's hands and put it back on the rack. 'Guys, seriously, *start looking* for Max. Mike and I will be over in a second.' Will joined Dustin and Lucas, who had now wandered over to a section with bobbypins and hair bands. Mike shook his head. What on earth had happened to them?

Nancy joined Mike and dragged him to the jewellery section. 'See anything you like?'

Mike's eyes widened in horror. 'I have no idea.' There were so many different things. Gold things, silver things, big red necklaces, bright pink earrings, brash blue bracelets. How the hell was he meant to pick something? How did girls spend so long in places like this? How did they not find it so stressful? His heart started pounding...

He started to turn away, 'This was a stupid idea.'

Nancy caught Mike's arm. 'No it wasn't, Mike. It was a great idea.' She smiled genuinely. 'It's very sweet.'

'It is?'

'Yeah. Jane will really appreciate it.'

Mike shook his head. 'Seems so weird, calling her that.'

'I know,' Nancy said, 'It's like another person, somehow. I can't imagine what she's going through. It's like giving up your identity and taking on another.'

Mike hadn't really thought of it like that. He'd only thought how weird it would be if and when he started calling her Jane. It felt wrong somehow. Formal. Like if someone called him, Michael. He shuddered. Then suddenly, he had an idea. 'Nance?'

'Yeah?'

'Is there something like... could I get something with...El on it?'

Nancy turned to her brother, surprised, but smiling. 'I don't think there's stuff with the name on it... but maybe there's something with...yeah, here we are.' She pulled a delicate gold necklace from the rack, with two pendants hanging from it. Nancy draped the necklace over her hand. Mike noticed one of the pendants was an 'E', and the other was a small gold heart.

Mike looked at Nancy. 'Do you think she'd like that?'

Nancy grinned at her brother. 'Yeah, I really do.'

Mike shuffled awkwardly and took the necklace from Nancy. 'I don't

know, I thought it could be like... a reminder... of who she was before? When she was El?' Mike looked closely at the necklace. He liked the idea of her wearing something he gave to her...hopefully that would let her know how he felt without him having to say it...

'Did Hopper say you could give it to her, tomorrow?' Nancy asked.

Mike nodded. 'Yeah.' He looked again at the necklace. 'You don't think.. I don't know... is it too cheesy?'

'Why don't you think on that? The boys have ventured into lingerie again,' Nancy replied, looking over to see Dustin holding up a lace thong. Will was blushing a fierce pink and Lucas also looked very embarrassed.

Mike rolled his eyes and looked again at the necklace. Was it right to remind her of her name before she became Jane Hopper? Jane was her invitation to a normal life, after all. If anything, maybe the name El was something she wanted to forget? But when he thought of El, he didn't think of Eleven, a clinical Eleven, he thought of El. *His* El. He thought of the warm and fuzzy feeling he got in his stomach whenever one of the boys said her name. Maybe this could be a way for her to remember the time from when she'd escaped from the lab to when she became Jane? The time when they'd met, and then been apart, and then come back together again.

'What did you get, Mike?'

Will broke him from his thoughts. Mike looked over at Nancy, who was now turning Dustin and Lucas away from the lingerie.

He rolled his eyes and turned to Will. 'I think I'm gonna get her this.' He held up the necklace in front of Will.

Will smiled widely. 'I think she'd really like that.'

'Yeah?'

Mike nodded again and returned Will's smile. Happy with his choice, he took it to the cashier, who thankfully offered to wrap it for him. Wrapping was a whole other avenue to the alien process of buying a gift for El that he just hadn't considered.

'Thank you,' he said to the cashier, taking the bag from her, feeling awkward just holding it. If anyone from school saw...

Will nudged him. 'Are you gonna tell her?'

Mike frowned. 'Tell who, what?'

Will blushed. 'You know, *Eleven*, are you gonna tell her that you...'

Mike shook his head, swallowing hard. 'I think Lucas had it right, you know?' He took a deep breath. 'I just need to play it cool and let her know how much I like her, *without* saying the 'L' word.'

'Do you?' Will asked softly.

'Do I what?' Mike was vaguely distracted by Dustin crying with laughter, having located what he thought was a *girdle*. He was sure he'd seen one in his Mom's laundry one time.

Will rolled his eyes. 'Dur, do you love Eleven?'

Mike met Will's eyes, but nodded. 'It's weird, you know?' He hesitated before saying, 'I can't stop thinking about her... and it's like... everything's better when she's there. And I hate leaving her... I just can't stand it.'

Will grinned cheekily. 'You got it bad, Mike.'

Mike returned his smile. 'Yeah I know.' His face became serious. 'It's just... things are changing so fast, you know? I mean, we have Max now, and El... And you're back and everything's... normal.'

'But it's different,' supplied Will.

'Yeah,' Mike agreed. 'It's like things have changed somehow. I mean, we barely played D&D yesterday...' He shook his head. 'Lucas is going to the arcade with Max later... not us...'

Will smiled lightly, 'And you're buying a present for your girlfriend.'

Mike laughed. 'Still sounds weird.'

Will dropped his voice to a whisper. 'Hey... did you want me to ask my Mom about talking to El about... *you know?*'

Mike's stomach fell. He'd kind of forgotten about their discussion before the girls had arrived at Will's yesterday. 'Shit, I don't know yet,' he replied. 'What do you think?'

Will shrugged. 'Well, I can ask her... but I don't really know how to do it without drawing attention to the fact that it's you that's asked.'

Mike's eyes widened. 'And if she knows it's me, she'll tell Hopper and Hopper-'

'-will kill you,' Will finished with a giggle. He looked over at Dustin, Lucas and Nancy, now looking at jumpers. 'How about Nancy?'

Mike looked at Will with sarcastic eyes.

'Okay, maybe not,' Will replied.

Mike sighed. 'It's not that it bothers me that she doesn't know... I guess it's just... I don't know.. I feel like she should because I do, and we all do, and every kid our age should know that stuff. It's not like I wanna... *do stuff.*'

Will raised his eyebrows sceptically.

Mike blushed. 'Okay, maybe I do, but I'd never do anything. I mean, we're *thirteen*. And Hopper would kill me.'

'So, what do you want me to tell Mom?' asked Will.

Mike bit his lip. 'I don't know, maybe... just that we think that Eleven should know?'

'Eleven should know what?' asked Nancy. 'And remember guys, *Jane.*'

They left the shop together, Lucas and Dustin's faces were red from crying with laughter. Mike shrugged, flashing a warning look at Will. 'Nothing.'

Nancy tilted her head and looked fiercely at Mike. '*Jane* should know

what?'

Dustin and Lucas took one look at Mike and Will and knew exactly what they were referring to. Dustin shrugged. 'Oh nothing, it's just Mike was worried that Eleven didn't know anything about sex.'

'Dustin, seriously?' Mike blurted, exasperated.

Lucas smacked Dustin's arm. 'Seriously man, not cool.'

'What's the big deal?' asked Dustin.

Nancy's face held a mixture of surprise, anger and bemusement. 'I...oh jeez... this is...Mike... what the hell?'

'It's nothing,' Mike said quickly. 'It's not like I wanna *do* anything... but she should know this stuff, right?'

Nancy thought a moment before saying, 'Yeah, you're right. I'll talk to Mrs Byers, all right?'

Mike's face brightened. 'Really?'

Nancy nodded. 'Chores for two months?'

Mike had no choice but to nod in agreement. It turned out that having an older sister when you had a girlfriend was actually pretty useful.

Lucas cleared his throat. 'Would this be a bad time to mention that you need to go on a date with Keith Newton?'

Nancy groaned.

10. Chapter 10

Chapter ten

'Well, guys, I think we're done for the day,' Dustin said proudly, closing his D&D binder with a deep sigh and slurping the last of his Coca Cola.

'What are you talking about?' Lucas questioned, checking his watch. It's barely six, and my Dad said I can stay out till at least eight. I am in *no* rush to get home. Erica is asking me more questions about Max than my Mom.'

Will laughed happily. 'What is she asking?'

'Oh the usual,' Lucas replied, taking on an imitation of his sister, 'How much do you love your new *girlfriend*, Lucey? How's *Max*, Lucey? What did you get for your new girlfriend, Lucey? I'm telling you, she's driving me crazy!'

'What did you get for Max?' Mike asked quietly, his wrapped necklace for El burning a hole in his pocket.

Lucas grinned. 'Actually, I got her a book on skateboarding moves. I gave it to her this morning. She thought it was really cool.' He paused, but with a knowing grin, asked, 'What did you get for Eleven?'

Mike bit his lip. 'Oh...me? It's nothing... really... um...'

Dustin, too, met Mike's embarrassed eyes with a snigger. 'Oh, so we won't expect to see Eleven with a beautiful new necklace the next time we see her...?'

Mike flashed a warning look at Will. 'Seriously?'

Will shrugged with a twinkle in his eye. 'They must be psychic.'

Lucas patted Mike lightly on the shoulder. 'I think she'll love it man. Seriously.'

Dustin got up and put on his coat. 'You going over there now?'

Mike's stomach was twisted with nerves. 'Yeah, I think so. I just said to El I'd be over later.' He looked at Will. 'To be honest, I thought they'd be at your house.'

Will smiled. 'They're coming over tomorrow, I think.'

Mike nodded. 'Great, just me, El and the Chief tonight, then.'

Lucas laughed. 'You'll be fine, Mike.'

Lucas' words rang in Mike's ears as he wheeled his bike to the cabin through the light covering of snow they'd had that morning. The necklace felt so heavy in his jeans pocket, he felt sure he would fall over... or perhaps that was just his jelly legs. He had never given a gift to a girl before... not unless you counted Nancy or his Mom, but they surely didn't count. Nancy had reassured him again that morning that El would love the gift, but now, as he approached the door... he felt more nervous than the night of the Snow Ball.

He lingered on the porch for a moment, smelling the smoke that was gushing from the chimney and feeling a little warmth from the house. To say it, or not to say it... that was the question.

Saying 'I love you' for the first time to a girl seemed crazy. He had barely known her a year ago, but since then, even though he'd barely seen her, he'd *felt* her, he'd spoken to her every night, and she'd heard him. Mike felt a connection with El unlike anything he'd ever felt before, with anyone, boy or girl. He was happy when she was happy, he was sad when she was sad. He could look in her eyes and know exactly what she was thinking and feeling. His stomach skipped happily. He thought of her smile, her eyes, her *hair*. He thought of the way that she made him feel... and couldn't help the smile that curled his lips.

He nodded triumphantly. He definitely loved her. But then again, he thought sadly, did El even know what love was? Would she even realise the magnitude of what he was saying to her... really? After all, she hadn't even known what a friend was the previous year. She knew that he was her boyfriend... and that the relationship that she

had with Mike was different... something much more than her friendship with Dustin, Lucas and Will. He squirmed uncomfortably. Maybe it would be better to wait until they were older... till she knew what love really was. Maybe Lucas was right... maybe they were too young to really say those things...and mean them.

'You just gonna stay out there all night, Wheeler?'

Mike was jolted from thought by the sight of Hop at the front window, pressing his face up against the glass with a sarcastic smile. 'Oh sorry, hi Chief.'

Hopper opened the door and Mike stepped inside. He looked around for El, his eyes finally landing upon her on the sofa. She jumped up when she saw him, striding straight for the door and enveloping him in a hug and squeezing him tightly. 'Mike!'

Mike laughed, hugging her back. 'Hi El.' He pulled away. 'It was only Saturday when you saw me last!'

El smiled, 'It feels like longer.' She looked over Mike's shoulder at Hopper, who was standing in the kitchen, his arms crossed. 'Daaaaaad... what did we talk about?'

Hopper put his hands up with a grin. 'All right, all right! I'll be out chopping wood if anybody needs me.' He spread his fingers. 'Ten minutes, tops!'

Mike felt his body relax when Hopper shut the door behind him. El turned and looked into his face. 'I managed to convince him to leave us alone for a bit.'

Mike smiled gratefully, his whole body aching to hold her. His face grew serious as he moved in and kissed her long and hard, cupping her chin softly. He had to tell her, he *had* to. The words bounced around inside him, skipping in his stomach. Reluctantly, he drew away. 'El, I-'

El, a little breathless from the kiss, took his hand and led him to the sofa, 'Come on, let's sit down. I have a present for you,' she said excitedly.

Mike ignored the words and sat down next to her, suddenly remembering the gift as it bunched the pocket of his jeans. 'Hey, me too!' He retrieved the small gift wrapped box, suddenly feeling like it wasn't enough.

Eleven reached onto the coffee table, retrieving a large box and placing it in on Mike's knee. 'You first.'

Mike shook his head in disbelief. 'El, you really didn't have to.'

El grinned. 'My Dad said it's like my...' she clicked her fingers, trying to recall the word, '*allowance* for the year?'

Mike's heart ached, wondering what on Earth she had bought him that would have cost so much money. He ripped the paper off...and couldn't believe his eyes... seeing the familiar packaging. Realistic High Power CB Walkie Talkies. Not only were they a model up than the one he already had but this meant...

Mike's eyes widened, feeling his heart dance. 'Does this mean that-'

El nodded. 'Yup! We can talk to each other! You know, like you do with Dustin, Lucas and Will! I mean... my Dad says the signal might not be strong enough.'

Mike scanned the back of the box, in awe, reading the spec. 'No, no I think it will! El, *shit*, this is amazing! Thank you so much!'

'Well, I will be taking part of the present,' she said shyly

The words bubbled to the surface again as he looked into her twinkling eyes. He shook himself out of it, as his insides turned to jelly. Breathe, Mike, he reminded himself. Just breathe. 'I have something for you, too.' He passed the box to her, suddenly feeling that it was *nothing* up to what she had given him. They could talk, *every* night. Why hadn't he thought of that? He'd been so busy thinking of something girly... and she'd come up with the perfect present for both of them.

El began to open it and Mike looked down at his hands. 'It's not much,' he said quickly, feeling his cheeks turn pink.

El opened the box. Mike heard a small gasp, barely daring to look at her. 'Mike...'

'Yeah?'

'Mike, it's beautiful,' she whispered.

Mike's heart soared and he heaved a sigh of relief. 'You really like it?'

'I love it!' she replied.

The word struck Mike's chest nervously. He coughed.

She touched the necklace daintily. 'Can you.. I mean... can I wear it?'

'Yeah,' he grinned.

El dug into the box, releasing the chain and holding it up to Mike. 'Can you?'

Mike said a silent thank you to his sister for showing him how to work the clasp on necklaces when they'd got home the previous night ('Mike, you need to learn this...' 'What?Why?' 'Because nine times out of ten, when a guy buys jewellery for a girl, she will ask him to put it on for her.'). He smiled again, seemingly unable to do anything else in El's presence. 'Sure,' he replied.

El stood up and turned away from him. Mike gently took the chain from her and draped it around her neck. 'I just thought... that with us having to call you Jane when we're out, and when you come to school with us next year... it might be nice to remember being...'

'El,' she finished, touching Mike's hand at her neck, then holding the E and the heart pendant tightly.

Her touch sent pulses of electricity through Mike's entire body. He wanted *desperately* to hold her, kiss her. She was inches away from him but it somehow wasn't close enough. He huddled in, sliding his arms around her waist and resting his chin on her shoulder. The three words fluttered up to the surface again. 'El...'

'Yes?' She turned to look up at him.

The words sank back down again, feeling like lead weights in his stomach. 'Do you really like your present?'

'It's so pretty,' she said, examining the 'E', and then the heart. 'What does this mean?' she asked genuinely. 'I think I saw it on one of Nancy's jumpers once.'

Mike's own heart pummelled inside his chest. He cleared his throat. 'The heart...well... the heart means love...' He closed his eyes, suddenly feeling happy that El couldn't see his face. She didn't really know what it meant... did she?

El's voice was bright. 'Well I love this necklace, so it makes sense,' she smiled.

Mike sighed, squeezing El closer to him. 'Well... no, that's not really what it means.' He felt sure that his heart was going to explode. He was going to do it, he had to. He couldn't bear the words inside him any longer.

El frowned, holding the heart again. 'Well, what does it mean?'

'It means that-'

'Time's up kids!' Hopper announced. Mike froze, suddenly very aware that his arms were wrapped around Eleven's body. 'Oh ho ho! I don't think so!' Hop called, pointing towards them. Mike released El immediately, feeling that his life had surely just ended. How could he have come so close to telling her... for Hopper to just... He felt a sudden surge of anger towards Hopper, but knew he could never show it.

El smiled shyly, her eyes lingering on Mike's. His stomach fluttered. Did she know what he was just about to say? There was something there... something behind those eyes.

He tore his eyes away from her. 'Sorry Chief,' he said quickly. 'Thanks so much for the walkies.'

Hopper reached in the fridge for a beer. 'No problem. More for my own peace than anything else. At least this way, you won't be nagging me to see each other as much.'

'Halfway happy,' El said happily.

Hopper nodded. 'Right...' His eyes drifted to El, who was still inspecting her necklace with a knowing smile on her face. 'What's that kid?'

'Nothing,' Mike and El said together. El dropped the necklace onto her chest, where it laid daintily above her white t-shirt and dungarees.

Hopper walked over to El and El took Mike's hand and squeezed it gently, just for a few seconds. Mike's eyes flickered onto hers and felt his heart flutter again. It felt like a secret, that only the two of them knew. El released her hand when Hopper touched the necklace.

'You bought her this?' Hopper asked thoughtfully.

'Yeah,' Mike said quietly.

'Where from? Been thinking about getting Joyce something similar.'

El rolled her eyes 'You haven't got Mrs Byers anything for Christmas?! Dad, you do know it's Christmas Eve, right?'

'Right,' Hopper nodded.

'And nothing's open tomorrow?' Mike put in.

'Right,' Hopper nodded, then the severity of the situation hit him. 'Oh SHIT!'

Panic seized Hopper's voice as he said, 'Don't you dare go anywhere! I'll be back in an hour! And don't... oh jeez... just stay three feet apart or something!' Hopper grabbed his keys from the small kitchen table and skidded out of the door, slamming it behind him.

The house was silent for a few seconds, the fire crackling in the background, casting a warm glow over the cabin.

'Alone,' El said with a shy smile, turning around to face Mike. She stretched her toes up and kissed him softly.

Mike wished he had something to hold onto to steady himself. He was alone with El, on Christmas Eve. The stuff dreams were made of. He heard Hopper's car drive away in the distance and felt his face go red... again. What he wouldn't give to not turn a darker shade of pink every time he was alone with her. The words stacked on top of each other. I. Love. You. He cleared his throat. Come on, Wheeler, you can do this.

Before he could open his mouth to speak, El had wrapped her arms around his neck and was kissing him fiercely. He responded eagerly, his hands grabbing her waist, pulling her closer to him. He was lost, his eyes closed, surrounded by her and only her. He felt so *alive* in that moment, he couldn't think of anywhere else he'd rather be than there, with his arms wrapped around her, feeling her lips on his.

They drew away, both a little shaken by their passionate clinch. 'Mike...' El said softly.

'Yeah?' he asked, his eyes still closed.

'What does the necklace mean?'

Mike opened his eyes slowly, barely breathing. He looked at her, his face serious now. Did she know? Her eyes were twinkling. Either way, he needed to explain it. He needed her to know, once and for all. He drew away a little, but kept his hands at her waist. 'Well see, the heart, it's like a symbol for love...' El stayed silent, Mike went on, 'But it's a different from other kinds of love.'

El smiled but asked, 'Kinds of love?'

'Yeah,' Mike went on, stroking El's back with his fingers. 'You see, there's 'love' like you really like things. Like,' he thought, 'Like I love D&D, and I love Star Wars... and you love Eggos.' El's face lit up, but she was still smiling knowingly. He looked briefly to the ceiling, then back at El, 'then there's love like you love the Chief, and I love my family... well, maybe just Mom, Nancy and Holly,' he laughed softly. 'My Dad can be a real jerk sometimes.' He paused... not having realised before how many different types of 'love' there were. 'Then there's love like how I feel about Dustin and Will and Lucas. Like friends. You really like them. You like hanging out with them, and

you want them to have fun, and be happy.'

'I love your friends too,' El said lightly.

Mike's stomach squirmed. 'And then there's a different kind of love. When you're *in love* with someone. It's like... when you can't stop thinking about them...and you always feel happy when they're around...you feel like this electricity somehow...' El's eyes sparkled. Mike cleared his throat, 'You feel like they make you a better person...and you wonder what you would do without them...' Mike moved his hands to El's neck gently. 'You wonder what you *did* without them for-'

'353 days,' El whispered.

Mike laughed lightly. 'Yeah, 353 days.' He paused. 'Love is...' Mike looked deep into her eyes. 'I love *you*, El,' he said, clearly and confidently.

El didn't hesitate. 'I love *you* too, Mike.'

Mike leaned in and kissed her passionately, soaking in every inch of her. He knew they were young, and maybe Lucas had been right... but to not say it? He had never felt more, happy, more alive and more in love with her than he did at that moment.

Merry Christmas Everyone! :)

Mileven1302